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DONISHA PRENDERGAST, THE GRANDDAUGHTER OF BOB MARLEY, PROMOTES PUBLIC SERVICE.

ON THE SCENE

Marley vibe

DESCENDANT OF REGGAE KING PUMPS RASTAFARI FAITH IN ALEXANDRA PARK LOVE-IN

BY SAIRA PEESKER

If Bob Marley were alive today, he probably wouldn't be making music. That's what his granddaughter says anyway.

There's just too much other work to do in the world, Donisha Prendergast tells an eager crowd packed closely around her in a grassy patch between the library and the outdoor pool at Alexandra Park on Friday night, August 5.

Promising a dialogue on youth, spirituality and the much misunderstood Rastafari, the charismatic actor and activist addresses a mostly adult group and speaks of her grandfather as a Rasta first and foremost.

If Marley were alive today, he'd be focused on doing positive work in the community, she says. "There's lots of good singers."

In his day, she points out, the reggae king was spreading Rastafari through a newly popular form of music, but now the movement has reached all corners of the world.

Prendergast, who was born after her grandfather's death, is here promoting a soon-to-be-released film, RasTa: A Soul's Journey, in which she visits Rastafarian communities in Toronto, Ethiopia, Israel and South Africa, as well as other cultures that share some of its practices, like the dreadlocked,

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pot-smoking Hindu mystics of India.

Anyone looking to get a straight answer about the basics of the movement is out of luck at the Scadding Court event, an unstructured, two-hour Q&A. Audience questions jump from racial profiling by police to the cultural significance of the Queen of Sheba.

Asked to explain the culture, Prendergast says, "That is your decision. You must know when the time comes, and you must know what it reveals.

"Rastafari represents African-ness. There is no other movement in the world that shows Africa is the way forward right now and identifies an African king and an African queen. If you take Rastafari out of this world, then the colours, the dreadlocks, the music, Bob Marley, all of that is gone. You understand?"

The idea of sacrifice and public service comes up again as she traces her own evolving understanding of what it means to be a Rasta.

"It represents love, unity, peace, sacrifice, service and justice for all. And inspiration. And we are all divine beings. The only way I feel whole is if I do service," says Prendergast, who helped start a recycling company in Jamaica, where such services are uncommon.

"I grew up Rasta, but it wasn't until I began this journey that I realized I wasn't Rasta."

The film's Toronto-based executive producer, Patricia Scarlett, says she first became aware of Rastafari's reach while travelling the world for her job at TVOntario.

"It has spread to cultures that are not in any way connected to Africa or Jamaica," Scarlett tells NOW. "There's something in the message as spread through reggae that people relate to. It's really a reinterpretation of the Old Testament."

While it's not clear how many Rastas there are in Toronto, Stats Can figures for 2001 put the number at 415. Beliefs vary among different Rastafarian communities, but many believe in the Bible and see Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I as a reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Selassie (emperor until 1974) was highly regarded on the world stage for bringing Ethiopia into the UN and writing his country's first constitution.

Many are vegetarians and adhere to an Ital diet: food that comes from the earth, without preservatives or other chemicals. Some also avoid salt unless it comes from the ocean.

But while ganja smoke may be one of the few things outsiders associate with Rastafari, Prendergast mentions it only once, while encouraging people to check out Jamaica's inaugural Manifesto Festival in November, a collaboration with Toronto's Manifesto crew.

"There will be lots of concerts, lots of life, reggae music, greenery, everything nice," she says.

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